



Provisional edition

Monday 24 June 2024, afternoon

Official report of debates

Opening of the sitting No 16

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

We shall begin this afternoon seating with a communication from the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ BURIĆ.

Madam Secretary General, dear Marija, it is a great pleasure to welcome you in our brand-new hemicycle for what will be your last official address to the Assembly.

Please, allow me to thank you wholeheartedly for all the work achieved during your 5-year mandate, which are not technically over, of course.

There were many crises and challenges, as we discussed this morning in the Bureau, during your mandate, to which you swiftly adapted, leading the Council of Europe and its staff in uncharted waters.

Let me mention but a few.

The sanitary crisis of the COVID-19, which prompted the Organisation to adapt to new ways of working.

The Russian war of aggression against our member state Ukraine and the following exclusion of Russia from this Organisation.

But also a historic Fourth Summit of the Council of Europe. The first of its kind since Warsaw in 2005, which saw a recommitment of our political leaders to the fundamental values of the Council of Europe.

The establishment of the Register of Damage is one of its core achievements. And you have never failed to take the opportunity to highlight this during your numerous meetings with actors outside of this Organisation.

These were definitely not easy years for you to deal with, dear Marija, yet you managed in all circumstances to push the Council of Europe and the values it defends forward, protecting the fundamental rights of all our European citizens, putting high the promotion of women's right, and defending the rule of law.

Another subject close to my heart: i'm happy we achieved results during your mandate in the framework of artificial intelligence. In this regard, I would like to also thank you for spreading the world on this important and first-of-its-kind international legally binding treaty and for encouraging more states to adhere to it.

We are happy that we had you as a Secretary General, that you were there to act, to benefit our Assembly and the Committee of Ministers, but also the staff of the Council of Europe.

In this report:

1. Speeches in English, French, German and Italian are reported in full in English.
2. Speeches in other languages are summarised from the interpretation and indicated by an asterisk (*).
3. Speeches in German and Italian are available in full on the Assembly's website.
4. The text of the amendments is available at the document centre and on the Assembly's website. Only oral amendments or oral sub-amendments are reproduced in the report of debates.
5. Corrections should be handed in at Room 1081 not later than 24 hours after the report has been published.

We are looking forward to hearing your address and the lessons you drew from your professional experience in Strasbourg.

So, madam Secretary General, dear Marija, I'm honoured to give you the floor.

Address: Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ BURIĆ, Secretary General of the Council of Europe

Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ (Croatia, Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Mister President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, dear Theodoros,

Ladies and gentlemen, Parliamentarians,

Dear friends,

Thank you for inviting me to make this last speech as Secretary General.

As a former member of this Assembly, I have long been aware of the skills, commitment, and dedication that the members here devote to their work. In my current role, I have been privileged to gain a fresh perspective on the depth of your determination to protect and promote human rights, the rule of law, and democracy across our continent. I share this determination and am proud of what we have achieved together during my term of office.

Admittedly, we have faced challenges: a pandemic that has cost lives and livelihoods, both on our continent and around the world; the rise of populism and extreme nationalism that have led to anti-rights movements and democratic setbacks; and of course, in 2022, the Russian Federation's decision to unleash a full-scale war against our member state, Ukraine, a brutal, illegal and ongoing war that has brought death and destruction, rape, and torture of a nature and scale not seen in Europe since the end of the Second World War.

As a result, the Council of Europe presented a united front by suspending and then excluding the Russian Federation from our Organisation. We were right to do so.

Following on from this, I believe it was also right to convene a 4th Summit of our Heads of State and Government to present a united front, to give direction and impetus to help us make the greatest possible impact in the new geopolitical environment we have faced and continue to face. Last year's summit in Reykjavík was the largest-ever gathering of leaders from our 46 member states. It was also a resounding success. Not only did the leaders recommit themselves to the values and standards that define our Organisation, and in particular to the implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights and the execution of the final judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, but they also approved a set of specific commitments alongside other initiatives already underway and others that have been put in place since last year.

The importance of the Council of Europe is not only self-evident, but we also have the most ambitious and important work program in decades. We have a new set of Principles for Democracy to measure and analyse the health of European democracies, with a new committee to help us achieve this. Last month, foreign ministers meeting at our ministerial session adopted our new Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, an international treaty, the first of its kind, which will be open for signature in September and will help ensure that artificial intelligence respects our rights and does not compromise them.

We are also working on new tools on the environment, recognising the threat to our rights posed by the triple global crisis of pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss; and on migrant trafficking, a scourge that causes misery for so many and enriches criminal gangs. In addition, we have expanded the membership of our Istanbul Convention, which is a benchmark standard on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, and which has brought about real, positive change in all the countries that have ratified it.

We have also adopted a new strategy for gender equality and taken various initiatives to support LGBTI people, Roma and Travellers, as well as migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers despite, and sometimes in response to, the rise of frightening anti-rights groups.

Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ (Croatia, Secretary General of the Council of Europe): We have also opened for signature a second additional protocol to the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime, which last week attracted its 46th signature, and we will go on to extend the reach of justice further into cyberspace.

The Committee of Ministers has adopted my roadmap complementing other recent reforms to bring civil society closer to the work of the Council of Europe, and in turn better ensure civic participation throughout our member states.

We have taken significant steps to build closer relations with other international organisations, both to ensure that our work is complementary and to avoid duplication.

This has been a priority of mine from the beginning of my mandate. I am pleased by the level of co-operation with the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the European Union, which has taken further significant steps towards ratifying the European Convention on Human Rights, and which has also provided several of our member states with a membership perspective.

We will now assist those countries in meeting key aspects of the criteria required to become full EU members as we have with so many other European countries in the past.

One of those countries is Ukraine. To Ukraine's future, its free democratic and European future, we remain absolutely committed.

Our unique Register of Damage became fully operational in April. With offices in The Hague and Kyiv, it has already received thousands of submissions, and it will process many more, as the first step towards an international compensation mechanism in which the Council of Europe is engaged and ready to play its part.

Just as we are working closely with the core group and are ready to play whatever role required in setting up a tribunal to try the crime of aggression. All of this recognises the need for Russia to be held to account for its crimes. So, too, does our consultation group on the children of Ukraine, which aims to provide help to Ukrainian children, wherever they may be, and complements the work that we have done with member states to help them meet the physical and psychological needs of the Ukrainian refugees who have come in search of safety.

We also remain committed to our action plan on resilience, recovery, and reconstruction, which is reinforcing Ukraine's democratic institutions, structures, and practice now and moving forward.

I know that in the months and years ahead, the Council of Europe will continue to do whatever it takes to support Ukraine. This remains our number one priority.

But I also know that work on all of the issues that I have mentioned today will also continue, as it will on many others, not least our contact group on Belarus, set up almost two years ago as a truly unique concept that provides support and training to democratic forces and civil society actors from that country.

New challenges will also emerge and require attention, as they always do.

In this way, the Council of Europe can play a pivotal role in reversing the democratic backsliding that weighs on our continent today and help forge a future in which our common standards in human rights, democracy, and the rule of law stand firm and strong.

Last autumn, our member states agreed on my proposal to increase this Organisation's budget, in real terms, for the first time in 17 years.

As we continue to celebrate the Council of Europe 75th anniversary, I believe that the importance of its future success is understood by our member states and that, despite all the complications, there is an opportunity to build on this Organisation's extraordinary legacy with a new layer of success.

I hope that each of you will play your part in making that happen and, from not so far away, I will be looking on and wishing you well.

Thank you very much once again for all the support during these, as the President of the Assembly said, very difficult years, very challenging years. I think we can all be proud of what we have achieved, and I really wish that you continue this important work as the Parliamentary Assembly is a political and very important statutory body of the Council of Europe. You can take things further in moving on the path of the three pillars of this Organisation: human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

I wish you all well in doing that.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear Marija, this is a moment to be remembered, so I would like to ask you to wait just for a few minutes. I want to thank you so much on behalf of this Assembly for these very inspiring thoughts.

I would like to add, dear colleagues, that we at the Parliamentary Assembly always appreciated your readiness to engage in dialogue and to take into consideration the views of our parliamentarians.

This morning, you were present in the Bureau meeting, and the leaders of our political groups paid tribute to your eventful but also very successful and productive term of office. They had proposed you write a book – you remember that I told you, "Don't write it yet because you are too young to resign and books – biographies – are for retirees."

So, I want to add, just finally, a few words. I wish to reiterate the message conveyed this morning on behalf of all our colleagues. Thank you for your excellent work. Thank you so much for your fruitful co-operation and dialogue with the Parliamentary Assembly. Thank you for your unwavering commitment to the values, principles, and objectives of this Organisation. We wish you the best of success in your future endeavours. If you will allow me to present you with a small gift that I brought from Athens, I am coming near you.

Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ (Croatia, Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Well, it's not by chance.

It's Athens, the cradle of democracy.

It will remind me that I worked here, on one of the three pillars that are important.

Thank you very much once again.

Debate: Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee (continued) / Observation of the presidential and parliamentary elections in North Macedonia (24 April and 8 May 2024) (continued)

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Before we go on, dear colleagues, allow me to remind you that you should insert your badges before taking the floor.

As you begin your speech, please, press the microphone button once only, and wait for two seconds, and it will work.

Now, the next item on the agenda is the continuation of the debate on the progress Report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee and the report of the ad hoc Committee of the Bureau on the observation of the presidential and parliamentary elections in North Macedonia.

I remind members that speaking time in this debate will be limited to 3 minutes.

The debate must conclude at 4:55 p.m., so I propose to interrupt the list of speakers at about 4:50 p.m.

In the debate, I will call first, on behalf of the Socialist Group, Mr Stefan SCHENNACH.

Dear Mister Stefan SCHENNACH, you have the floor.

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH (Austria, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President,

First of all, I would like to congratulate the two Reports; the Progress Report and the Report by Mr Alfred HEER on the elections in Moldova, where we were together, and also followed the political change at all levels.

The Progress Report reports on everything that has happened here between April and June during the reporting period - among other things, other countries have named their judges; and we will soon have three out of four of them here for the elections. That's one thing, but if we look at the entire period, two or three things stand out.

Firstly, we have all had a great many discussions with the candidates for the new Secretary-General. In this context, I would also like to take the liberty of addressing a few personal words to Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ; that I would like to thank you very warmly on behalf of myself and my group for your work, and I still have very fond memories of when we were both colleagues here in the Assembly and had such a harmonious and good cooperation across political groups. And you did a great job and we won't forget that.

During this time, however, our new elected Human Rights Commissioner also took up his duties. And there were a few very disturbing things that will lead to further discussions here too. One was this NGO law in Georgia, which gives cause for concern - namely concern for the protection of democracy. But it is particularly disturbing that the very populist government in Slovakia has destroyed public television and radio. And the Council of Europe in particular has always attached great importance to this - and I have often represented the assembly at the European Public Broadcaster - how important this is. And I would like to take this opportunity to express my solidarity with all the journalists employed there who do an outstanding job. But - because they do excellent independent work, the station has been closed down; and that is really very bad.

Even if we have problems with the country for which I was a reporter for seven years, Azerbaijan, we should never forget that Anar Mammadli, for example, whom we awarded the Václav Havel Prize, was imprisoned during this very reporting period. And we should make use of every opportunity to get Anar Mammadli out of prison again. And in the meantime, of course, there was also the important conference on Ukraine in Switzerland.

With this in mind, my group is very, very pleased to take note of this Progress Report, but also of the Report by the rapporteur, Mr Alfred HEER, on the elections in Moldova. And they were interesting elections and we very much hope that the Gagauz Russians will find a place in society again, thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Stefan.

On behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, Mr Christian BUCHMANN.

Mr Christian BUCHMANN (Austria, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Esteemed colleagues,

First of all, on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, let me express many thanks to Ms Secretary General for her commitment for the Parliamentary Assembly and for the Council of Europe, for her work and for her co-operation, her willingness to co-operate also with the members of the Parliamentary Assembly.

I would also like to express many thanks to the rapporteurs of both of the Reports. We, as the Group of the European People's Party, will be with these Reports.

I was part of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe electoral observation mission to North Macedonia for the second round of the presidential elections, and also for the parliamentary elections. It was quite interesting to see and to learn about the developments in the country. These elections were competitive and well run, particularly given the challenge of organising two elections at a time.

Despite this strong political polarisation and fragmentation in the country due to inefficiencies within the public administration as some of the people see it, corruption issues like reforms, the election day was generally calm and peaceful.

On behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, and in addition to the Report presented by Mr Alfred HEER, I'd like to mention just a few points.

The voting procedures were largely respected, but in a number of cases, election boards did not fully keep to the procedures during the voting count.

The access to polling stations for the elderly and the handicapped was often not easy, therefore hindrances should be suppressed.

Measures to improve the organisation of the out-of-country voting should be taken, in our opinion.

Finally, I would like to mention the men and women of the electoral boards. They did, in my opinion, an excellent job. They demonstrated how well-trained they were for their jobs, and this is also an important point for the assessment of Northern Macedonia and their willingness to access the European Union.

Thanks very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Christian.

On behalf of the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance, Mr Zsolt NÉMETH.

Zsolt.

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Dear President, dear colleagues.

I would like to congratulate Ms Elisabetta GARDINI and Mr Alfred HEER for their Reports.

As I mentioned not long ago, it is really great to be back in this Chamber again, which still smells good and new. And I would like to congratulate our Secretary General and our President that you have been able to manage this hard period moving between the old and new locations in the European Parliament. And I think it was also important that we have been able to save the party line sitting orders structure we have embraced in the European Parliament. So congratulations to everybody who played their role in this period.

Yes, we are going to elect our Secretary General and I would like to congratulate Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ for her work and I would like to also mention that I think it is important that our candidates satisfy the Junker criteria and I was glad to experience that they have visited, most probably all of the capitals in the Council of Europe – over 30. I personally was glad to receive all three of them, for example, in Budapest. So I believe that this process is unique. Until now, we have not had this experience with the secretary generals and I would like to welcome its examples.

I would like to draw your attention to a scandal. Our member, Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO, a member of our European conservative group just sitting in front of me and an MP, was convicted in absentia for 10 years by the Russian military district court for justifying terrorism. I believe that this has no legal basis. It is really scandalous and I think it is happening for the first time to a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and we should find a way and means to step up for our colleague.

Finally, I would like to congratulate everybody who has been elected in the European elections, national elections also happened. The key message of this election was that the European Union works and as Pope John Paul II said in the 1980s, "Europe breathes with two lungs". I think we can use this paraphrase for today. Europe breathes with two lungs – one lung is the European Union, the other lung is the Council of Europe, and we need to have co-operation.

Dear colleagues, finally the North Macedonian elections – I think it proves that North Macedonia is a working democracy and it is high time for the European Union to start negotiations and to prove that enlargement is not an illusion but a reality.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear Mister Zsolt NÉMETH, thank you so much for your kind words, and thank you for reminding the Assembly what happened to Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

I stood by him from the first moment by reproducing a statement that it is an unacceptable action from the Russian regime. Unexpected, but on the other hand, unfortunately, the way that they are behaving.

First of all, we have this war of aggression in Ukraine. They violated any kind of international law, ethics, democracy, rule of law, human rights.

Even though it was unexpected, we stand by you, Oleksii, on this unacceptable action by Putin's regime.

We are going on now.

I will give the floor to the leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Mr Iulian BULAI.

Can you please wait for a minute?

We just have to press once and then wait for a couple of seconds.

Mr Iulian BULAI (Romania, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Are we good?

Thank you, President.

Dear all, on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, I want to reiterate the thankfulness that I've shared on our behalf to the Secretary General for your work, your dedication, your commitment, your courageous decision when that was needed.

I don't know if I am really agreeing with a statement of the President or not encouraging on writing books. The deputy Secretary General is an excellent author and still a person in office. So I'm looking forward to both following you in your future career, but also looking forward to reading your books.

That being said...

Mr Iulian BULAI (Romania, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): I must also thank the rapporteur for this Report and her work, and I congratulate Moldova and Ukraine for starting the dialogue for negotiations to join the European Union. This will be awarded tomorrow, 25 June 2024.

Mr Iulian BULAI (Romania, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): I also want to thank our colleague, Mr Alfred HEER for the Report on North Macedonia – well written, thank you for your job, Alfred.

I, on behalf of the Liberals, welcome the decision of the Council of Europe to use the windfall profits from the Russian Central Bank's frozen assets to support Ukraine's recovery and military defence.

From the very start of Russia's full-scale war of aggression, our Assembly has been demanding a comprehensive system of responsibility for the crimes committed by Russia and this week we will examine important reports on this matter and they offer an excellent analysis including the use of frozen assets and we hope that democratic word will deliver on this engagement.

I would like to draw your attention to two important events taking place this week which raise the issue of Ukrainian civilian hostages held by Russia. One will be on Wednesday, where we are the hosts, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group, it is a side event organised by us in collaboration with different important actors and we will be discussing the situation of Ukrainian journalists detained in Russia. And on Thursday, we will launch the Parliamentary Network on the situation of the children of Ukraine. This is a historical moment and I call upon as many as possible to subscribe to this network.

At the same time, we should not forget the fight and the efforts of those who fight for a free and democratic Russia, some of them outside Russia, some of them still in prison. And I am thinking of our liberal friend, Vladimir Kara-Murza who is still in prison and is incarcerated and along with the other tortured political prisoners, he is fighting his silent war against the dictator from the very little cell where he is now. His life is in danger. We think highly of him.

I want to wish lots of wisdom to the Secretary General that is to be elected. There are great decisions to be taken in the future and I really hope for a solid, transparent, correct and good partnership between the Secretary General, the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and I will not end before asking the Committee of Ministers to come with a response to the report they have asked us to write on the accession of Kosovo to the Council of Europe.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Iulian.

On behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, Mr Andrej HUNKO.

Mr Andrej HUNKO (Germany, UEL, Spokesperson for the groupe): Many thanks, Mister President,

Thank you also for the Report to Mr Alfred HEER on the elections in North Macedonia.

We always talk about a Progress Report at the beginning of the Assembly. Unfortunately, it is not always the case that we can speak of progress. We still have the situation in Azerbaijan, where we cannot accept the return of the Azerbaijani delegation following the very unpleasant signals from Azerbaijan.

We have the situation in Kosovo, where this Assembly proposed in April that we open the process, so to speak, for a recommendation to be made to the Committee of Ministers. That has now been postponed for the time being. I think it is a good thing if the outstanding issues there - for example, the solution to the question of the Serbian association of municipalities - can be resolved, and I think we will have a major debate on this in the coming weeks and months and also in this week's session on the situation in Georgia, on the so-called Foreign Agents Registration Act. And I hope that we will have a good debate here, and a good resolution. And that there will also be a balanced resolution at the end.

In recent weeks and months, we have also had the peace conference in Switzerland, where the Council of Europe also signed the final declaration. The Secretary General co-signed it. In my opinion, it is a bit over the top to talk about a peace conference. Important issues have certainly been addressed, including in this Resolution - for example, the need to protect nuclear power plants, the need to protect grain exports and also the need for political exchange of political prisoners. But, to develop it into a real peace conference, I think more states would have to be invited - including the parties involved in the conflict themselves.

There is a lot more I could say, but I think these are the most important points at the moment. Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Andrej.

We are now proceeding with the Speakers' list.

I will first give the floor to Ms Sibel ARSLAN.

Dear colleagues, I would just want to remind you that we first put our badge, and then we just press once, only once. Wait for two seconds and the mic is going to work.

Ms Sibel ARSLAN (Switzerland, SOC): Yes, you can now.

Perfect.

Thank you very much, Mister President.

Dear colleagues, I'm one of the co-rapporteurs of the Post-Monitoring Dialogue with North Macedonia with Mr Joseph O'REILLY. According to our Joint Observation Mission, the presidential and parliamentary elections in North Macedonia were competitive and well-run.

An intensive and pluralistic campaign helped voters to make an informed choice.

The elections were marred by negative rhetoric, personal attacks, and questionable threats increased before election day.

There were also allegations of vote-buying involving all major political parties, which highlights the need for greater efforts to address these concerns.

While the legal framework creates the base for democratic elections, many gaps and inconsistencies remain making further reform essential.

A number of key recommendations made by the Venice Commission and ODIHR remain unimplemented.

Election days were calm and peaceful, proceeding in a constructive atmosphere. Despite the strong political polarisation and fragmentation, voting procedures were largely respected and public confidence in the election administration was generally high.

Regarding the representation of women, it must be noted that the quotas were met, but the efforts to advance women were very small.

As part of the election observation, a small Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe team had the possibility to visit the Idrizovo Prison. We noted that the elections were efficiently organised in Idrizovo.

The delegation thanks the authorities for having us there.

We were ready to conduct the post monitoring dialogue with the authorities, and we are looking forward to visiting North Macedonia after the summer break. I want to thank Mr Alfred HEER and the Secretary for the great job.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your attention.

I now give the floor to Ms Arusyak JULHAKYAN from Armenia.

Please insert your card, press the button once, and wait 2 seconds. Thank you for your attention.

Ms Arusyak JULHAKYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Dear colleagues,

While discussing the progress report of the Assembly, let me take the opportunity to tell you about the recent developments in the normalisation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

On 19 April this year, the commissions of Armenia and Azerbaijan working on the delimitation of the state boarder between the two countries, reached an important agreement.

The parties agreed that the border delimitation process will be based on the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1991.

Based on this agreement, the parties agreed on the separate sections of the borderline in the northern part of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in order to bring them into compliance with the legally justified inter-republican border that existed within the Soviet Union at the moment of its dissolution.

Since then, more than 12 kilometres of the borderline have been delimited and the border services of both the countries were deployed along the grid sections of the borderline.

This was indeed a positive and stabilising step towards the normalisation process.

However, 10 days later, the foreign affairs ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan met in the symbolic city of Alma-Ata for peace agreement negotiations, but no substantial progress was achieved there, as Azerbaijan is reluctant to reflect the agreements already achieved in the Treaty.

Furthermore, Azerbaijan came up with new preconditions declaring that they will be ready to sign the peace treaty only after Armenia amends its constitution, as they argue that there are territorial claims in its provisions, which is not true.

Armenia recognises the territorial integrity and inviolability of the borders of all its neighbours.

Armenia is loyal to this principal and does not have any ambitions beyond its internationally recognised 29 743 square kilometres.

The Constitution of Armenia and the amendments to it are internal affairs of Armenia, and we consider the attempts by officials in Baku to intervene in the internal discussions in Armenia as a cross intervention into the internal affairs of the country.

Such rhetoric torpedoes the peace process and casts doubts on the sincerity of the leadership of Azerbaijan to achieve peace.

In addition to the above mentioned, recently Azerbaijan started to periodically disseminate information that Armenia is violating the ceasefire regime.

Azerbaijan does so every time it is going to initiate another escalation.

On 15 June, the prime minister of Armenia declared that it is the will of the government of the Republic of Armenia not to allow tension, and proposed to Azerbaijan to create a bilateral mechanism for investigation of cases of violations of the ceasefire regime.

No answer has been received from Azerbaijan yet.

Dear colleagues, Azerbaijan's practice of predicting regional escalations at every opportunity is alarming and comes to prove the analysis made by a number of think tanks that Azerbaijan will do everything to disrupt the process of concluding a peace agreement with Armenia in order to launch a new aggression against Armenia after the COP29 to be held in Baku in November this year.

I draw your attention and the one of the international community to this as well as to the fact that Yerevan's official proposal to conclude the peace agreement within one month remained without response by officials in Baku.

Thank you for your attention.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam.

Mister Goncharenko, you have the floor.

Have you inserted the card and pressed once? Please wait 2 seconds. Thank you for your time.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Oh yes, thank you very much.

And yes, as you already heard from our President. Thanks to President Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS and Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, you already know that if before you did not have a convicted and sentenced criminal among your friends and colleagues, now you have. That's me – ten years of prison from a Russian military court. Last week, this was their decision and this is their message to all of us. Yes, definitely, it is a badge of honour. Not just for me in person but for all our Assembly because we are the only international body which managed to kick out Russia from its membership and that is great, but it is also a very pragmatic thing from their side. Yes, it is a way to threaten me and also to limit my diplomatic activity in defending our values because many countries in the world have extradition agreements with Russia, so I already cannot go to these countries. And please be aware of this: yes, I am the first Ukrainian MP and the first member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to be sentenced but believe me, I will not be last.

They will continue to do this. So our dilemma is very easy: either we take Putin to hard court or he will sentence and kill all of us. It is as easy as this. So Putin delenda est. Putin's regime should be destroyed. This is the only way for us. We do not have any other way and do not think that it is too hard to do, that it is impossible to do, just remember, exactly one year ago, Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny. Just a small group of mercenaries almost took Moscow. They stopped two hours before Moscow just because of their indecisiveness, and you know what happened after – Putin killed Prigozhin.

So the only strength that Putin has is your indecisiveness – is our indecisiveness. The only strength he has. So if we are decisive, we can finish this awful regime and we should do this. And do not think that if Putin succeeds in Ukraine, he would forgive all of you the sanctions, the humiliation, the missiles and tanks to Ukraine, he would never do this. So we do not have a choice. We need to finish this awful regime and we can do this, believe me.

I want to tell you that, at the beginning of our meeting, there was wonderful music and an anthem of Europe, *Ode to Joy*. I want to remind you of another anthem which is probably even more relevant now [he sings *La Marseillaise*]. This is, "to arms my friends, to arms citizens, to arms all of us, Europe", and we will succeed and that is the only way for us. Putin's regime should be destroyed.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Mister Fassino from Italy, you have the floor.

Mr Piero FASSINO (Italy, SOC): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

I'd like to talk about the elections in Northern Macedonia, because I think we need to pay close attention to the results and their political consequences.

As you know, as far as the elections in Macedonia are concerned, victory went to the opposition party, the VMRO: it's a conservative party, a party that challenged the Prespa Agreement and above all the Agreement on the name "North Macedonia", which was essential in opening the way for Macedonia to join the European Union. It will not accept any reference to the Bulgarian minority in the Macedonian constitution. These are two essential points in the normalization of relations between Macedonia and the European Union, and Macedonia and Bulgaria.

I think we need to pay close attention to this, because the framework, the Western Balkans scenario, is a very weak one. There is clearly an objective on the part of Mr Dodik, the President of Republika Srpska, to separate from Bosnia into Bosnia-Herzegovina; there is a condition of weakness in Montenegro due to the

crisis that has opened up within the majority party, pitting the President of the Republic against the Prime Minister; the question of relations between Serbia and Kosovo has not been resolved; and today, we have a government in Northern Macedonia with a strategy and a line, according to the speech made by the new Prime Minister, that calls into question the Prespa Agreement, an agreement that has been useful in giving stability to Northern Macedonia and the region.

I think we must be very concerned, and we must send a very clear message to the Macedonian authorities. Of course, the elections must be respected: whoever wins is legitimately in government. But I think we need to send a very clear message: we are asking the new Macedonian government to respect the international commitments signed by the previous government; to really fulfil the Prespa Agreement, not to call into question the Agreement on the name of Northern Macedonia, which has been settled, and not to interrupt the dialogue with Bulgaria to also settle the condition of the Bulgarian minority in Macedonia.

I think this is essential to help avoid destabilizing yet again a very delicate and weak situation in the Western Balkans.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Madam Kravchuk from Ukraine, you have the floor.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, ALDE): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Dear colleagues,

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank madam Secretary General Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ for her work. We have a lot of things to remember, of course.

As it was already mentioned, the exclusion, expulsion, of the Russian Federation in 2022 actually gave sort of a second breath to the Council of Europe. We had this leader summit, we had the register of damage created. We might have a special tribunal created. It will be quite historical.

Right now we are at a historical moment, of course, of making a decision tomorrow, as an Assembly, for another Secretary General.

It's very important the overall criteria to the candidates to go forward to establish the compensation mechanism after the Register of Damage is established. To make sure that we do create a special tribunal. That's what leadership means.

I would like to underline that we are a special Assembly, because no other assemblies select secretary generals in international organisations. We do have power as parliamentarians, so let's use it wisely.

Of course, I would like to stop a bit on the North Macedonia elections.

First of all, for the first time in the history of this country, there is a woman president elected, Madame Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova. Of course, I want to congratulate her as the first female president of North Macedonia and to thank her for coming to the peace summit in Switzerland, to be in Berlin for the recovery conference, and also signing the communique after the peace summit.

But of course, I want to underline that the participation of women in parliamentary elections could be better. Because though there is a 42% formula, women are being put in the lower part of the list.

I would recommend to follow what we have in Ukraine. In Ukrainian legislation, for every five candidates, you have to have two or three different genders. It brings more women to the parliament.

Also, we can share with North Macedonia new legislation that we passed –I'm a co-author of it– on media.

In the Report, it's rightfully mentioned that this country should go on with a renewal of media legislation, so we can share our experience because we are both on the path to the European Union.

I wish luck to North Macedonia to be a member of the EU, and of course Ukraine.

Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister Blikra.

Jone, from Norway, you have the floor.

Mr Jone BLIKRA (Norway, SOC): Thank you.

The Report concerning the observations of the presidential and the parliamentary elections in North Macedonia on 24 April and 8 May is a well written, detailed and informative Report.

Thank you to Mr Alfred HEER, the rapporteur and chairperson of the ad-hoc Committee, the two co-rapporteurs, the legal advisors, the representatives from the Venice Commission and all staff that made it possible to arrange this observation.

And thank you to the North Macedonian authorities and to all the people all over North Macedonia who made this election possible to arrange.

This Assembly observed these elections while North Macedonia is engaged in a post-monitoring dialogue with the Assembly.

The Report describes many challenges concerning rule of law, human rights, independence of the judiciary, the fight against corruption, securing the rights of minorities and other important topics. There is still important work to be done and I expect full co-operation from the recently elected authorities in North Macedonia on these issues.

On the two voting-days the administration of the voting process was assessed positively by observers in 99% of the polling stations observed. Representatives from political parties or candidates were present in 86% of the polling stations, contributing to transparency. Of course, there were situations and some violation of regulations, but in total the election process was positively evaluated.

North Macedonia is an important stabiliser in the Balkans and it is crucial that we continue to work together – the Council of Europe and the people and authorities of North Macedonia.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your time.

Madam Gören from Türkiye, you have the floor.

Ms Seda GÖREN BÖLÜK (Türkiye, NR): Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Dear colleagues,

Northern Macedonia is a crucial country for the Balkans and for the continent, and certainly for Türkiye. The two countries have strong historical and cultural ties. We have important bilateral economic and diplomatic relations with North Macedonia.

In addition to the friendship and co-operation we have established at a political level, citizens of Turkish origin in Northern Macedonia and our citizens of Macedonian origin in Türkiye bring the two countries even closer together. Türkiye sees its support and co-operation for the stability, prosperity and development of North Macedonia as a requirement of our deep-rooted common history.

Last but not least, our friends in Northern Macedonia have always given us their support and proved their friendship during the earthquake we suffered last year. I would like to thank them, once again.

On 8 May 2024, the citizens of North Macedonia went to the polls for the second round of presidential and general elections. Northern Macedonia held its eleventh general election and seventh presidential election since the declaration of independence in 1991. A total of 1 755 candidates: 1 002 men and 753 women, from different alliances and political parties, were vying for the 120 seats in Parliament. We congratulate all the candidates and political parties for conducting a fair and competitive electoral process.

As Türkiye, we express our satisfaction with the five parliamentarians of Turkish origin who have taken up their duties in Parliament. Northern Macedonia is an important example for the Balkans, having succeeded in ensuring social cohesion in a multi-ethnic society.

Dear colleagues,

I would like to congratulate North Macedonia on its successful assumption, for the period July 2023 to June 2024, of the presidency of the South-East European Co-operation Process (SEECP), which aims to strengthen political and security co-operation between the countries of the region, promote economic co-operation and extend co-operation in the areas of democratic institutions of justice, the fight against illegal

activities and humanitarian rights; it brings together NATO allies, members of the European Union and countries that do not belong to any of these organisations. It is therefore, of the utmost importance that we preserve and make effective use of the SEECP as a regional initiative with a real structure.

Given that we Balkan countries share the same history and culture, I believe that we will succeed in integrating into the continent through dialogue. I believe it would be in the interest of all continents to support these initiatives for a successful enlargement of the Union and for regional prosperity.

Finally, I would also like to congratulate North Macedonia on its democratic elections and I wish the new government every success.

Thank you for your kind words.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Mister Gevorgyan from Armenia, you have the floor.

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN (Armenia, EC/DA): Madam Chair,

Europe is facing crucial challenges. They will define not only the place of Europe in the global order but also its future as a unique civilisation. I will elaborate about three such issues.

First, all institutions of European integration and co-operation should redefine their mechanism of operation and functionality. The Council of Europe has a special mission in this regard and the new Secretary General should deal with this challenge without delay. We have to avoid the evolution of the Council of Europe into a simple bureaucratic entity that serves the interests of the right governments. Such an approach has already resulted in a situation while the democratic institutions of Armenia, despite the reforms wanted by European taxpayers, are functioning in a non-democratic way. Unquestionable commitment to human rights, democracy and the rule of law are and must remain the only criteria for our Organisation.

The second important challenge is the obvious abuse of the idea of the European perspective or path for domestic propaganda reasons. Let us face it, over time European aspirations have been allowed to become tools for the domestic political speculations and competition that have been damaging to this very idea. The European dream has in fact ceased being an encouragement for the elites to make reforms and positive changes. When the European idea is based only on the reason of staying in power, when it is inadequate to existing geopolitical and historical realities, it only becomes a source of new division lines inside the society. It is a fact that such negative processes are being started in Armenia too.

And the last, we observed trends of Islamisation as a tool of influence on domestic political processes in Europe and we see Türkiye's role as the generator and main beneficiary of this. Two years ago I distributed a research report in this Assembly which showed how Türkiye and its minor ally Azerbaijan have used funds and influence to weaponise religion in Europe and against European democratic security. In these past two years, we see only new signs that this trend is well and alive. The most recent mutiny in French New Caledonia, according to French officials, encouraged by Azerbaijan, is just the latest example. Armenia is already experiencing the whole power of aggressive and neo-Ottoman aspirations of Türkiye and Azerbaijan. To avoid these new troubles and deeper division lines inside European societies, Europe must stand against this trend.

Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Madam Vogels from the Netherlands, you have the floor.

Ms Rian VOGELS (Netherlands, ALDE): Distinguished colleagues,

I had the opportunity to take part in a mission to observe the parliamentary and presidential elections in North Macedonia in May 2024 on behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). We formed a joint international elections observation team, together with my fellow members of this Assembly, members of the European Parliament, and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

In two working days, all elections observers were well-prepared, including a crash course on the organisation of the country North Macedonia and its electoral system and many introductory sessions with NGOs and political party leaders.

We also met the independent presidential candidate, Ms Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, who was elected with a large majority, becoming the country's first female president.

This was a notable exception, as the campaign featured few women political figures overall. Although the law requires a minimum of 40% representation of each gender or each candidate list, and all lists met these requirements, the women were often placed in the lowest positions on the list, hence not elected.

On the day of the elections, on the 8 May, my observation team visited 13 polling stations in Skopje and its surroundings. We found no irregularities. It was a calm and peaceful election day.

The joint international observation mission concluded that the elections were competitive and fundamental freedoms were respected, but while the election legislation provides a suitable framework for holding democratic election, many gaps and inconsistencies compromised legal certainty, making further reform essential.

I wish North Macedonia all ambition and strength to implement necessary reforms on its way to a future as a full member of the European Union.

It was an honour and privilege to serve as an election observer in North Macedonia and share my experience with you today.

Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madame.

That concludes the list of Speakers.

Madame rapporteur, Madam Elisabetta Gardini, you have 3 minutes to reply to the speakers.

Thank you for your time.

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, EC/DA, Rapporteur): Thank you.

So, in the meantime, I would like to thank all my colleagues whose speeches I have listened attentively to, and I can say with gratitude that the work done by my colleague Mr Ian LIDDELL-GRAINGER as rapporteur has been appreciated and that this Report has been met with unanimous approval.

Let me make a few notes.

I thank my colleague Zsolt NÉMETH, because he brought to the attention of the Assembly a fact that could not be on the Report because it happened last week; that of the conviction of our colleague Oleksii GONCHARENKO, sentenced to 10 years in prison by a Russian court in absentia. This is truly unprecedented, and I support what the Assembly president has already said in a tweet because it is another act to be deplored, but it also confirms the good work that is being done by this institution.

The work will be continued. In fact, my colleague Mr Iulian BULAI also mentioned Vladimir Kara-Murza, and just this morning the Bureau ratified the terms of the new general rapporteur on the Russian opposition. So the situation of Vladimir Kara-Murza and other human rights activists in Russia will be the focus of the new rapporteur's work.

To conclude, recalling what my colleague Stefan SCHENNACH said who mentioned the peace summit that was held in Switzerland, I would like to mention that our Secretary General Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ participated in that summit, and she made a very articulate speech, where I like to emphasize her expressed sensitivity with respect to the situation of Ukrainian children. So, after what we have also said today at the Bureau, let me also here in the Assembly thank Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ for the work that she has done, because she has held this role in probably the most difficult years that this institution has experienced. Including the period of the pandemic and the wars that came back to Europe, something that my generation thought they would never see.

So, thanking all the colleagues for the work this morning and this afternoon, which shows that beyond the sensitivities that sometimes divide us, we can find a path to take forward together, which is the role of this institution, and is a very beautiful role of defending democracy, the rule of law, human rights. I want to once again salute and thank Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ because she brought perhaps a feminine touch and also a feminine sensibility that this institution in these years particularly needed.

And again I thank all of my colleagues and wish us all good work.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam.

The discussion is closed.

The Bureau has decided to propose to the Assembly for ratification the committee referrals contained in Doc. 16007 Addendum 1 and 2.

Are there any objections?

There are no objections. These references are therefore ratified.

We will now vote on the other Bureau decisions contained in its activity Report in Doc.16007, Addendum 1 and Addendum 2.

Are there any objections to the adoption of these decisions?

There are no objections. The progress Report is therefore agreed.

The next item is the presentation of the Report "Amendment of certain provisions of the Rules of Procedure" by Mrs Ingjerd Schie SCHOU, on behalf of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs (Doc. 15996).

I would like to remind you that we must conclude the debate, including the vote, at 5:30 p.m. We shall therefore interrupt the list of Speakers at around 5.20 p.m. so that we can hear the Committee's reply and proceed with the necessary votes.

We'll wait a little and then resume presently.

Madame Rapporteur, you have a total of 7 minutes to present your Report and 3 minutes to reply to the speakers at the end of the general discussion.

Thank you for your time. The floor is yours.

Debate: Modification of various provisions of the Assembly's Rules of Procedure

Ms Ingjerd Schie SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, Rapporteur): Thank you, Madam Chair and Madam President, and colleagues.

It is important to regularly reflect upon how to improve, to clarify, simplify or modify our rules to ensure the best possible functioning of our Assembly.

The draft Resolution before us is the result of thorough discussions in the Committee.

I'm grateful to my colleagues for the fruitful discussion which has enabled us to agree on all the points included in the draft Resolution.

The draft Resolution contains proposals regarding the procedure for examining amendments in the plenary, speaking times for rapporteurs, quorum requirements in committees, notifications of substitutes by debate, the possibility of tabling written questions to the Committee of Ministers by groups or members, the duration of the terms of reference of periodic review reports by the Monitoring Committee, additional rights of partners for democracy, and the specific conditions upon and decisions by the Bureau. Minor adjustments to the terms of reference of certain committees and various changes necessitated by parliamentary practice. Lowering the threshold for the formation of a political group, removing explanatory reports for debates under the urgent procedure, and access to meetings of the Monitoring Committee for secretary or political groups.

I will go into detail on some of these issues.

The Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs was invited to look at the functioning of the Assembly during the pandemic. The procedures and practices from operating in remote and hybrid modes led to the modernisation of the Assembly in many ways. The Committee therefore proposed to permanently introduce mechanisms that add value to our procedures, many of which were highlighted by Committee Chairs in their feedback regarding their work during the pandemic.

Regarding these discussions or amendments in the plenary, we proposed that if a committee has not been able to take a position on the amendments the floor shall be given to the rapporteur.

Regarding speaking time allocated to rapporteurs, we proposed to limit speaking time to 10 minutes as has been the practice since the pandemic.

Regarding notification of substitutes, we proposed that substitutions are made by debate.

President and colleagues,

Following the expulsion of Russia from the Council of Europe, the number of Members of our Assembly has decreased. The Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs proposed that the threshold for the formation of political groups is lowered to 26 Members. The same percentage as the threshold was before Russia was expelled.

And like national parliaments, the composition of our Assembly changes as elections are held in member states.

It is essential to have a political representative [who is] credible and effective [and a] Parliamentary Assembly acting, debating, and deciding on the basis of ideas and positions – positions expressed by representatives of all the major European political families.

The Committee therefore, suggests cumulative criteria so that a political group is not immediately dissolved when dropping below the 26-member threshold. Being politically relevant and reactive is important.

The number of debates and urgent procedures has increased significantly. These debates considerably contribute to political relevance and visibility. In order to sustain this practice, the Committee proposes to simplify reports for debates under urgent procedure, with only draft resolutions, no explanatory memorandum. This will enable us to be even more relevant, President, and able to take important political positions on burning issues.

And, dear colleagues, last year, in 2023, our Assembly adopted a Resolution on the functioning of the partnership for democracy. Through this Resolution, we decided that the partners for democracy may be granted additional rights. This decision means that our rules must be updated. The possible additional rights may be granted by the decision of the Bureau, ratified by the Assembly, at the beginning of a new session. The decisions shall be based on the proposal by the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy and granted for the duration of a session, one year, with the possibility to extend or not to extend depending on the result.

Let me stress, Madame President, that these rights are not granted automatically and that the proposal in the Report is a result of the Assembly decision taken last year.

Colleagues and Madam President,

The Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs has discussed the terms of reference of reports. Possible prolongation was deliberated but we decided to stick to the current two-year mandate.

However, experience has shown that it is almost impossible for the Monitoring Committee to comply with this for the periodic review of reports. We therefore propose to extend the duration of the mandate of these references to three years.

Also relating to the Monitoring Committee, the appointment of co-rapporteurs has been discussed. In particular, the possible incompatibility of simultaneously being monitored, being rapporteur, and being a member or President of a parliamentary friendship group with the country in question.

And only one or two sentences more.

We concluded that, even though it is an asset to have a certain knowledge of the country concerned, being affiliated with its friendship group may objectively be perceived as a conflict of interest.

I would rather continue my speech later and follow the time rules.

So, thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam rapporteur.

In the general discussion, I now give the floor to Mr Martin GRAF on behalf of the European Conservatives and Democratic Alliance.

We can't hear you. Please put your card on, press the button and wait two seconds. Thank you.

Mr Martin GRAF (Austria, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, Madam President, for giving me the floor,

First and foremost, I would also like to thank the rapporteur for the hard work she and her team have put into the further development of the Rules of Procedure, the basis of our Parliamentary Assembly's business. And, we all know that Rules of Procedure ultimately represent a minimum compromise and should be supported as widely as possible so that they are effective.

Of course, there are criticisms here and there. So I don't want to keep this to myself. For my part, we have also strongly criticized the fact that only the strength of the parliamentary group, namely the number of mandates, is being reduced. I would like to remind you that in 2019, on the occasion of the formation of a parliamentary group - there was a motion to form a new parliamentary group here - it was increased from 20 to 28. And shortly afterwards, a few years later - you almost get the impression; at a time when another parliamentary group is in danger of no longer having these 28 mandataries - they intervene in a supportive manner and also reduce the number. So I don't think it makes sense to proceed arbitrarily here every few years. We need a basic framework, and I hope that this number will remain the same for some time to come - regardless of who is trying to form a parliamentary group or who is no longer able to do so.

At this point, I would also like to mention a point to which we need to pay much more attention. Based on reports from colleagues who are seconded to the Parliamentary Assembly here, we note that they are increasingly experiencing administrative difficulties in their home countries when it comes to travelling to meetings, commissions, etc., and that permits are often granted too late. I believe that it is a matter of course for this parliamentary body to ensure that every member of Parliament is able to get to the meetings on time to participate and contribute to the decision-making process.

I would cite the example of Armenia, where we repeatedly have problems with one or another member of parliament being able to participate in the decision-making process because of administrative hurdles.

I believe it is a matter of course that the President and the Secretary General should also take action here, and to a greater extent than in the past. Perhaps one more point that I would like to make very briefly is that, in my opinion, there is still no NGO transparency register. NGOs are increasingly lobbyists. We have a register of lobbyists, but not for non-governmental organisations, which very often serve political interests. And I believe that we also need to think about this when developing the Rules of Procedure.

Thank you very much.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Mr Iulian BULAI for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Mr Iulian BULAI (Romania, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam President.

Hearing someone talking about making a list of NGOs to be included in a transparent list sounds like a type of legislation adopted newly in a country that is identical to the one adopted in Russia in 2004.

So, I'm a bit sceptical about that type of procedures, but beyond that, "dear Ingjerd, thank you very much for what you have done for us" [spoken in Norwegian].

Thank you so much for your Report, dear Madam Ingjerd Schie SCHOU. It's been a great Report. I really have appreciated the fact that you've been doing it very wisely in dialogue with us and with exchange of views that have made it have a great outcome.

That being said, our group, and me personally, we are not the greatest fans of lowering the threshold for the lowest numbers of the group. That being said, I'm very happy that together we have made it so that there are two criteria that would ensure the existence of a group beyond the due date of the registration of the numbers in order not to allow abuses with the resources that are to be given in that group.

The transparency of resources and also the legitimacy of the group, they are very important. We should be vigilant in not allowing dormant groups in our Assembly. Of course, if we go too low, that is a risk. I think its outcome is very balanced. I think it has a high representation of the willingness to accommodate these requests by most of the members of the Assembly. We are happy with that.

I congratulate you one more time, and I hope that this will be voted by the large majority of this Assembly.

Thank you once again.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I now give the floor to Mr Andrej HUNKO on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left.

Mr Andrej HUNKO (Germany, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Madam President, thank you very much,

I would like to start by thanking the rapporteur, Ms Ingjerd Schie SCHOU, for her really extraordinarily committed handling of this Report and also for her open ear to suggestions.

On the question of the threshold for political groups - that was a big debate, back and forth - it has already been mentioned; we once had 20, then it was raised to 28, and so on. Actually, it's not really a clear rule compared to other international organisations. The European Parliament has 3.2% if you do the math. The Congress of the Region also has 3.2%. We are now above that, but it is now down from 28 to 26 because this parliament has become smaller after the Russian committee. We accept this and support it.

We very much welcome the fact that, in view of the fluctuating nature of this organisation, it changes after every election and some people are thrown out, so to speak, if you fall below the threshold after an election, you are not thrown out immediately.

We also welcome the extension of rights for Partners for Democracy. I hope that this will lead to closer ties with our partners in Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Morocco and Palestine.

As far as the problem with these friendship groups is concerned, we welcome today's Amendment in the Rules Committee, the proposed Amendment that, so to speak, only excludes them from reporting to the Monitoring Committee if they are chairpersons of friendship groups.

There are parliaments where you are automatically in the friendship group with practically the whole world if you are active in foreign affairs. And then you are very quickly excluded, so we support this Amendment. We welcome the fact that face-to-face meetings are the norm. And there are a few things where we have something to criticize - that is this change in current affairs debates, that the submitter is considered first. And we also think that the one-day deadline for substitutions is not very good.

On the issue of gender equality; the Assembly has repeatedly called for parity to be established - we are trying to do this as the Left Group. There are a number of difficulties, and we hope that our example will also help to ensure that the Presiding Committee is genuinely gender-balanced in future. Thank you very much.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I now give the floor to Ms Petra BAYR, on behalf of the Socialist, Democratic and Green Group.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, Madam President.

Yeah, rules of procedure are made to co-ordinate our work, to avoid disputes, and if there are disputes, to help us to settle them and the changes we debate today have been discussed for a quite long time. I want to thank Ms Ingerd Schie SCHOU for her long breath and her patience with us because it was not easy. But to be honest, it might not be totally over, the changes of the rules of procedure, because besides robust rules, we also need the engagement of MPs. Of course, they have to be able to participate and for the functioning of the Assembly, rules and active MPs are important. And we have the feeling that there are still some adjustments in our way of working that might help to make a better performance, to include more and engage more MPs actively, be it in the plenary, be it in communities, as rapporteurs or on election observation missions.

And to get an idea of what you all would like and how you would like to work in this Assembly, we have sent you a questionnaire via email. For those of you who would like to search for it, it was last Thursday at 5:39 p.m. Central European Time. It might help to find it in your emails. And this survey covers some very general questions about yourself, about your age, sex, whether you are in opposition or a governing party, whether you are from a small or a big delegation and so on. But we also ask about issues like what happened before you joined the Assembly, was it hard to get here, did you have to fight back and forth to do so, even if you did not want to come... So we would like to know that. We would like to know about how you feel during sessions, what about your participation, your preferences for the durations for instance of the plenary meetings, what incentives and challenges you see in your work. We also ask about tools like the app, like the media box. Do you know it? Do you use it? What else would you find helpful? What would you like to have and what is your attendance in the committees? What are your favourite committees? Which one do you not like so much? All these things are important to us. Also, what do you do after sessions? Is there any chance that what you are doing here, that the work you are doing here do you take it to your Parliament, is it debated there? Can you take it to constituencies or is nobody interested in it? If so, what can we do to improve the interest on your work here?

So we are very much interested to know your ideas, your feedback and this all will feed into a report that should help us to increase the quality of our co-operation and maybe we will need some more adaptations of the rules if necessary, so please, please, please fill in this questionnaire. We need the wisdom of the crowd, we need the wisdom of you.

Thank you very much.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your attention.

We now continue with the list of Speakers.

It's Ms Naomi CACHIA from Malta's turn. You have the floor.

No, she's not here.

The next speaker is Mr István HOLLIK, from Hungary. Please take the floor.

Mr István HOLLIK (Hungary, EPP/CD): Thank you.

As Saint Augustine wisely said: "Ecclesia semper reformanda est", in English means, "the Church must always be reformed".

It is an important message coming from the past.

In a changing world, we also have to adapt and renew ourselves and our common work, here in the Parliamentary Assembly.

The next item on the agenda discusses some regulatory provisions of the Parliamentary Assembly in order to clarify the changes that have occurred in parliamentary practice.

The main Amendments submitted affect the following areas: the procedure and work methods used in hybrid or remote mode and their feasibility, the procedure for clarifying applicable general assembly guidelines related to written questions addressed to the Committee of Ministers, and the duration of the assignment of periodic review reports prepared by the Monitoring Committee.

The procedures and practices used by the Parliamentary Assembly during the pandemic led to the modernisation and improvement of the Assembly's operation in many respects. Therefore, it seems desirable to permanently introduce those mechanisms that represent added value to the Assembly's procedures. I would like to thank the rapporteur for the excellent work. Thank you very much.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your time.

Mister Amraoui from Morocco, you have the floor.

Mr Allal AMRAOUI (Morocco): Thank you, Madam chair.

Dear colleagues,

As a member of the Moroccan Parliamentary Delegation, I would like to express my satisfaction with the close, multidimensional relations that Morocco and the Council of Europe have maintained for many years, working together to build optimal proximity, in the logic of a community of values, and progressive harmonisation of our legislation in the European legal area. This is the objective of our partnership.

Let me remind you that the Kingdom of Morocco was the first country in the region to apply for and obtain Partner for Democracy status with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 2011. Since then, this parliamentary partnership has been strengthened by the regular participation of our parliamentary delegation in the Assembly's sessions, as well as in the work of its committees and networks, fostering exchanges with our parliamentary colleagues from Council of Europe member states.

I would also remind you that Morocco has been the subject of three evaluations, in 2013, 2015 and 2019, during which the Assembly drew up a largely positive assessment of the results achieved within the framework of this partnership.

It was in this sense that the last resolution clearly demonstrated a firm commitment to developing co-operation with Europe's neighbouring regions as a means of consolidating democratic transformations and promoting stability, good governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and, beyond that, to initiating a reflection on possible evolutions of the status of partner for democracy.

As partnership is not a one-way street, a number of Moroccan experiences are relevant. Morocco should be seen as a bridge between Europe and Africa, and could help strengthen South-South co-operation. Since 2011, there has been a maturing process. This maturing phase should, understandably, remain a stage to be completed by each partner of democracy.

Also, Morocco has distinguished itself in its vicinity by its willingness to seal this partnership. The Moroccan Parliament has always been in favour of exploring new avenues in its co-operation with the Assembly as part of a partnership based on common interest and complementarity.

It is therefore both normal and legitimate for us, for our part, to aspire to and demand a certain differentiation. In the context of collegiality, a dividing line must be drawn in the Council of Europe's partnership approach.

The strengthening of partnership, with the aim of consolidating membership of a common legal area, is an end towards which we must strive. In this quest, the content is more important than the container, and the latter is only the means to achieve the former, without restricting its horizon.

It is therefore essential for this partnership to evolve, always demonstrating flexibility and creativity to imagine new formulas that break with rigid frameworks designed to serve the ultimate goal.

I would like to conclude by congratulating Ms Ingjerd Schie SCHOU on this Report. My thanks also go to the colleagues who follow and support the evolution of this partnership and invite the Bureau and the Assembly to grant the Moroccan Delegation, as of next January's session, the additional rights outlined in this Report.

Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your attention.

That concludes the list of Speakers.

I now call on the Commission to reply.

Madame rapporteur, you have the floor for 3 minutes.

Ms Ingjerd Schie SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, Rapporteur): Thank you, Madam chair.

Thank you, good colleagues, also for your comments.

I just want to finish what I just needed to say in my first speech: the rules of procedure are not very reader-friendly.

The Committee proposed that thorough editorial work is being undertaken to simplify our rules while ensuring coherence. I would like to give some comments to our colleagues.

First, I would like to say that this is the oldest Organisation dealing with democracy, principles of state, and taking care of human rights. It is the oldest Organisation in the international architecture. It needs some structure and it needs, also, clear rules.

This Report, we have worked with it for more than two years. A report lives as long as, until, the next one. I think there will be a next one in the future also, because it is also changing and new moments are coming.

I would like to give some thank you, Martin Graf, for your comments.

I do have to say that to form a political group –you can do that – but to be a political group here, as far as I remember – because I was a rapporteur for that Report also – you have to be present in seven or eight countries and reach more than 4% and so on.

And when we had the threshold for 26 now, well it is almost the same percentage as before; after the Russians left – the same figures in percentage as today.

I'd also like to say that I have thought that this Report will live longer than I am here, because it has been so difficult. We have to be honest about that. But also good reflections and good conversations, and also listen to the several, to the five groups and others coming here.

I think that this is the result of what we have managed to agree to, and I think I will also like, especially to thank the Committee secretariat because they have been very patient for their tireless efforts.

As times change and parliamentary practices evolve, this won't be the last report on modifying our rules of procedure.

I can say to my colleague Ms Petra Bayr, she's not here now, but I have fulfilled a questionnaire and I do hope that my other colleagues will do that.

Before now, this will be the most updated Report, I think, and also the rules that you can live with until the next report.

Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam rapporteur.

Madame President, do you wish to reply?

You have 3 minutes.

Ms Heike ENGELHARDT (Germany, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs): Dear colleagues,

Let me start my few remarks by thanking our rapporteur, Ms Ingjerd SCHOU, for her hard work on this Report. And as I suggested, it was two and a half years, thank you so much.

She has presented a comprehensive compendium of suggestions to update or strengthen our rules. Each proposal has been thoroughly discussed by the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs. We had a lot of important discussions, we took the necessary time to discuss the best of the proposals, and we have produced a good Report.

Believe me, while the Rules Committee has less members than other committees, its discussions are not less lively. I take this opportunity to also thank the Committee members for their involvement and for their dedication.

Much of our parliamentary procedure has developed and evolved in the light of our parliamentary practice. The Rules Committee shall continue to keep our Rules under scrutiny and stays at the disposal of the Bureau of the Assembly to look into further possible adaptations of the Rules.

But for now, I invite you to support the draft resolution presented by the Rules Committee.

Vote: Modification of various provisions of the Assembly's Rules of Procedure

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): The general discussion is closed.

The Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs has presented a draft Resolution (Doc. 15996), to which one amendment has been tabled.

Ladies and gentlemen, I remind you that speaking time in defense of an amendment is limited to 30 seconds.

Mr Didier MARIE has the floor to support Amendment no. 1.

Does anyone else wish to support the Amendment?

Mister Corlățean, you have the floor.

Mr Titus CORLĂȚEAN (Romania, SOC): Madam President,

Dear colleagues,

In a very spontaneous manner, I was among the co-signatories to this Amendment.

The idea is very simple.

Most of the colleagues members of different national parliaments are at the same time members of different parliamentary friendship groups with many other countries.

In this capacity there is a need to try to offer them also the possibility to do things here in the Council of Europe, not to be put in the situation of incompatibilities because they are members of friendship groups with other national parliaments.

So the proposal is to maintain this incompatibility for the chairs of the friendship groups from different national parliaments, but not to put obstacles to the simple members.

This is the essence of this Amendment. I think it's common sense. I will ask colleagues to support this Amendment.

Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your attention.

Does anyone wish to speak against the Amendment?

Yes, please.

Ms Ingjerd Schie SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD, Rapporteur): Yes.

There it is, yeah.

I will speak against, because I have to remember all of us the history of this Assembly and the problems, the history of problems with conflicts of interests, personally, specifically, in the monitoring procedure.

And why am I against?

I disagree with the Amendment and I think it's also a misunderstanding, because the proposal does not disqualify any parliamentarian who is a member of a friendship group from being a monitoring rapporteur.

The purpose of the proposal is to avoid potential conflicts of interest.

If you are a member, or chair a friendship group of a certain country, you should not be able to be a rapporteur for this specific country.

If, as in France, you have 150 friendship groups, you can still be be a member of 149. If this is a problem, well, you have to take a revote in your parliament.

Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

What is the opinion of the Committee?

We can't hear very well.

Could you repeat that, please?

Ms Heike ENGELHARDT (Germany, SOC, Chairperson of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs): Yes, the Committee was with the two-third majority in favour of the Amendment.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your attention.

We shall now proceed to the vote on the Amendment.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the results to be displayed.

Amendment no. 1 is adopted.

We shall now proceed to vote on the draft Resolution contained in Doc. 15996 (amended).

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the results to be displayed.

The draft Resolution contained in Doc. 15996 (amended) was adopted.

Congratulations to the rapporteur.

The next meeting will be held tomorrow at 10:00 a.m. in accordance with the agenda for this part-session.

The meeting is closed. Thank you for your attention.